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## **SIGNALING IRONY**

Bearing in mind the subtlety of verbal irony and the fact that its interpretation is a very specific process of inference, the recognition of verbal irony is heavily reliant on the so-called signals, markers or cues of irony. A thorough literature overview reveals that there is great versatility of such markers, some preferred in oral and some in written discourse. In this paper we offer an overview of the various irony markers mentioned by contemporary researchers. We also raise the issue that clearer “boundaries” between the irony markers, on the one hand, and the types of irony and the conditions for irony, on the other hand, should be established.

Key words: verbal irony, irony markers/signals, types of irony markers

### **1. Introduction**

Numerous scholars have argued over the need for and the nature of ironic markers. Manifestly in favor of the markers, one set of researchers define them as metacommunicative clues which “alert the reader to the fact that a sentence is ironical” (Attardo 2000a: 7). In their view, each ironic expression is composed of two parts - an ironic utterance and a signal (linguistic or of some other kind) which changes the meaning of the utterance (Löffler 1975: 125 in Stanel 2006: 33). Following this line of thinking, these researchers so far have managed to identify many different markers of irony in both oral and written discourse (Clyne 1974; Löffler 1975; Barbe 1995; Mucke 1978; Hutcheon 1995 etc.).

Another set of researchers, however, question their significance by contending that irony markers are neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for ironicalness (Kreuz 2000) and that ironic utterances may require, but not necessarily, the presence of such markers (Utsumi 2000).

In this paper we concur with researchers who acknowledge irony markers as a very prominent aspect of verbal irony and we look through various studies in order to obtain as profound insight into this issue as possible. More precisely, this paper encompasses various classifications which put in the foreground a wide array of irony markers used in ironic utterances to alleviate the process of expressing and processing irony.

We also try to draw attention to the fact that irony markers should be more precisely delineated and distinguished from the other aspects of verbal irony such as the conditions for ironicalness and the different types of irony.

## **2. An overview of some of the classifications of irony markers**

What follows in this section is a chronological presentation of some of the contemporary studies which take a broader and more inclusive approach to identifying and classifying the different types of irony markers.

One of the first and more comprehensive classifications of the markers of irony is proposed by Muecke (1978), who claims that “verbal irony is a skill, to say the least, but also an art, since in order to say something ironical one has to say it without saying it, i.e. one has to simultaneously say and not say something.” Analyzing various ironic expressions, Muecke noticed that the spectrum of irony markers is actually quite wide and that it encompasses many distinct types of markers which range from phonological (intonation, rhythm etc.) to non-verbal signals (gestures, movements etc.). More precisely, he proposes a classification which includes the following markers depending on whether there is contradiction between:

1. *The text<sup>1</sup> and the context.* Normally, both interlocutors presuppose that they perceive the world in the same way; that they have common values, customs and general knowledge. Hence, the context on which interlocutors rely heavily when using ironic expressions could vary from one single fact to an entire socio-cultural environment; from what is known only to interlocutors themselves to what is universally known and accepted.

2. *The text and the co-text.* When the speaker feels that he/she cannot rely on the context to signal the irony, he/she has to create verbal context, i.e. has to confront two parts of the text itself. The same thing can be achieved by a sudden or abrupt change in the expressions he/she is using or in the content itself.

3. *The text and the text.* The presence of irony could be signaled by expressions which are evidently inadequate or unnecessary in a given context. They can be classified as: kinesics, typographic, phonetic, lexical and discursive. Kinesics

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<sup>1</sup> The term ‘text’, in this context, refers to any sequence of words in both, written or oral form.

markers include facial expressions and head movements (looking over the glasses suspiciously, bowing ironically, applauding, nodding, winking etc.). Typographic markers of VI comprise exclamation marks, stars, quotation marks etc. Phonetic markers include nasalization, “blank” tone of voice and lack of accent, voice softening, fake coughing, imitating somebody’s voice etc. Lexical signals are usually words (mostly adverbs and adjectives used as intensifiers) and meta-linguistic tags used ironically (e.g. “*let’s say*“, “*so to speak*“, etc.). Finally, the so-called discursive signals include rhetoric questions and speech register changes (e.g. using elevated literary style in ordinary informal conversation etc.).

Willer and Groeben’s list of markers (1980) includes several other markers dubbed morpho-syntactic signals which pertain to changes in the word order of the expressions; using an adjective instead of a noun (e.g. “*Mr. Smart*”); omitting words from the expressions; unnecessary repetition of parts of the expression and using oxymoron (in Stanel 2006: 39).

Haiman (1989) expands Willer and Groeben’s list (1980) by including laughter, disdainful face, intonation changes, nasalization and quotation. He also assigns the role of irony markers to words and phrases such as ‘like’ which is used to warn the interlocutor that he is not to believe in what he/ she is going to hear next (e.g. “*Like I care.*“ (=“*I don’t care.*“), “*Like there’s any difference.*“ (=“*There’s no difference*“)); the negation ‘not’ used at the end of an expression which allows the speaker to believe in the sincerity of the previous expression up to the point when he hears it (e.g. “*He’s a snappy dresser . . . not!*“, “*Guess I’ll hit the books in time for that quiz . . . not!*“), and the double phrase ‘*Not that ... or anything*’ whose first part is used at the beginning of the expression and second part at the end of the expression (e.g. “*Not that I care about the money or anything.*“ (=“*I care passionately about the money*“)). Haiman (1989: 57) also considers the repetition of signs of assent (e.g. “*Sure*“, “*Right*“, “*Of course*“, “*Yeah*“, “*Yeah, right*“) and changes in the word order of expressions (e.g. “*A fine friend you turned out to be!*“, “*Some party this is!*“) as signals of irony.

Hutcheon (1994) in her research on irony primarily highlights that “nothing is an irony signal in and of itself”, and that a marker will be “a successful marker” only if it is recognized as such by a discursive community. Nevertheless, she recognizes the existence of: 1) paraverbal markers, i.e. gestural markers (a smirk, a wink, a raised eyebrow, the tongue in cheek), 2) phonic markers (throat clearing, change of voice register, alterations of speed, or the stressing of certain words, intonation and tone of voice), 3) graphic markers - punctuation signs and typographical markers (quotation marks, inverted commas, italics, diacritics, exclamation marks, question marks, dashes, ellipses, parentheses), 4) overtly metalinguistic remarks (e.g. ‘*so-called*’, ‘*so to speak*’, ‘*of course*’, ‘*as they say*’), 5) signals that function structurally (various register changes;

exaggeration/understatement; contradiction/incongruity; literalization/simplification; repetition and echoic mention).

Evidently, Hutcheon's classification greatly overlaps with Muecke's third category of markers, *contradiction between the text and the text*, yet he chooses to use different terms (paraverbal/gestural instead of kinesics; graphic instead of typographic; phonic instead of phonetic; overtly metalinguistic remarks instead of meta-linguistic tags used ironically; signals that function structurally instead of discursive signals).

Kreuz (1996) in his research on verbal irony recognizes quite an extensive list of signals which could be used in ironic expressions: 1) contextual signals, i.e. discrepancy between the expression and the circumstances (saying something which is obviously false); 2) litotes and hyperboles; 3) truthful expressions which are relevant but not completely relevant to a given situation; 4) echoic mentions of expectations, norms and mutual viewpoints; 5) extra linguistic signals such as: intonation and prosody of the expressions and certain facial expressions; 6) questions, offers, overly polite demands and expressive speech acts; 7) tag questions; 8) typographic signals such as: italics, quotation marks, underlining, bold and capital letters.

In his classification Kreuz (1996), evidently, makes mention of some new types of irony markers which have not been included in the previous classifications - the speech acts (questions, offers, overly polite demands and expressive speech acts).

Irony markers have also been investigated by Utsumi (2000) who proposes a very simple classification of the already identified irony markers. He allocates the markers into two rather broad categories: verbal and non-verbal irony markers. The category of the verbal markers, according to Utsumi, on the one hand, includes: adjectives (e.g. *wonderful, magnificent*), adverbs (e.g. *certainly, really, absolutely*); metaphors, hyperboles; exclamations (e.g. "*Oh!*", "*Augh!*", "*God!*"); prosodic paralinguistic signals (e.g. stress, intonation, overly accentuation, slow speech rate, nasalization) and speech acts (e.g. thanking, compliments etc.). The category of the non-verbal markers, on the other hand, refers to some specific facial expressions (e.g. disdainful look or 'blank' face), as well as some specific body movements (e.g. gestures, laughter, pointing at somebody or something).

In more recent times, Rosolovska (2011) analyzed American British and Ukrainian newspaper headlines and confirmed the existence of a host of irony markers: metaphors; rhetorical questions; omission; invented words created by adding certain lexical parts to the already existing nouns; oxymoron; euphemisms - softening expressions; cut sentences; reinforcing expressions (e.g. '*it is clear*', '*that is*', '*for sure*', '*it is natural*'); alliteration of phonemes or words as possible irony markers which, if used in an incongruent way, may cause ironic effect; replacement of

sentence parts, colloquial words, inversion of the subject and the direct object; the usage of some specific syntactic constructions; polysemy, homonymy, antonyms and idioms; negation of a sentence or a word; the usage of an opposite speech act (e.g. an order instead of a prohibition, a statement instead of a question) etc.

Several of these irony markers enumerated in Rosolovska's classification (the usage of colloquial words; the creation of new words and the usage of euphemisms) were not, in fact, mentioned by the previous categorizations.

Finally, one of the most recent attempts to compile a more comprehensive classification of the markers of VI is attributed to Burgers et al. (2013). According to them the signals should be roughly classified in four different categories: a) tropes such as hyperboles (Kreuz & Roberts 1995), rhetorical questions (Muecke 1978), b) schematic markers such as repetition (Muecke 1978) and a change of register (Haiman 1998), c) morpho-syntactic markers such as exclamations (Seto 1998) and tag-questions (Kreuz 1996) and d) typographic markers such as quotation marks (Attardo 2001) and emoticons (Kreuz 1996).

Burgers et al.'s classification of the markers also greatly resembles the previously mentioned classifications as it deals with more or less the same categories of markers, however, its importance, most assuredly, stems from the fact that this classification confirms that previous researchers' findings are still relevant to date.

### 3. Discussion

The overview of the different classifications of irony markers presented in this paper, we believe, offers a fair insight into what has been acknowledged as a very important aspect of verbal irony – signaling ironicalness. This overview also confirms the existence of a huge variety of linguistic and nonlinguistic means, which in appropriate circumstances, especially, when the context is not revealing enough (Bryant & Fox Tree 2002: 100) could act as cues for irony.

Nevertheless, this overview also raises another significant issue pertaining to the irony markers, on the one hand, and two other aspects of verbal irony: the types of verbal irony and the conditions for ironicalness, on the other hand. Namely, the above-presented classifications of the irony markers reveal that the "boundaries" among the irony markers, the conditions for ironicalness and the types of verbal irony are not always very transparent and clear-cut. In other words, what a particular researcher treats as an irony marker is treated as a condition for ironicalness or a specific type of irony by other researchers.

For instance, Muecke's *contradiction between the text and the context* marker, Hutcheon's *contradiction/incongruity* marker and Kreuz's *discrepancy be-*

tween the expression and the circumstances (saying something which is obviously false) marker are all tantamount to the condition for ironicalness - *discrepancy between the expectations and the reality* (e.g. “Such a wonderful weather today!”- uttered during a thunderstorm by someone who expected a nice weather), which is at the core of Kumon-Nakamura et al.’s *Allusional Pretence Theory* (1995), Attardo’s *Relevant Inappropriateness Theory of Verbal Irony* (2000), Utsumi’s *Implicit Display Theory* by (2000) and Colston’s *Theory of Verbal Irony* (2000).

Hutcheon’s *echoic mention* marker and Kreuz’s *echoic mentions of expectations, norms and mutual viewpoints* marker is what, in fact, is presented as the main condition for ironicalness in Sperber & Wilson’s *Echoic Mention Theory of Verbal Irony* (1981, 1986). Namely, according to them the ironist does not use but mentions somebody’s utterances, opinions, standpoints etc. in order to express disregard for them and to disassociate himself from them (Wilson & Sperber 1981: 305).

The marker called *truthful expressions which are relevant but not completely relevant to a given situation* in Kreuz’s classification, however, has previously been recognized both as a separate type of verbal irony, namely factual or truth-telling irony (Martin 1992) (e.g. “I love children who keep their rooms tidy” – uttered by a mother to her untidy son) and as a condition for ironicalness in Attardo’s *The Relevant Inappropriateness Theory* (2000).

Also, Kreuz’s treatment of hyperboles (e.g. “I should check 10 000 tests by noon!” – uttered by a teacher to his colleague) and litotes (e.g. “He is a little bit tipsy”- for someone who is extremely drunk) as markers is in contrast with some previous contentions according to which these two tropes should be treated as separate types of verbal irony (Winner et al. 1987).

Additionally, the treatment of the speech acts (directives, commissives and expressives) as irony markers in Kreuz’s classification is not compatible with their treatment as distinct types of ironic expressions proposed by Kumon-Nakamura et al. (1995). Namely, according to Kumon-Nakamura et al. (1995) when these speech acts are pragmatically insincere, i.e. when they are used for something different from what they are normally used for, they could be used ironically. In fact, they noted that irony can be conveyed not only through counterfactual assertions, but also by a) true assertions such as “You sure are hungry” to a person who have just ate half of the pizza meant to be shared among five persons; b) over polite requests, such as “I hate to bother you, but would it put you out too terribly much if you refrained from walking naked in front of your living room window,” from a neighbor with kids who frequently play in their front yard across the window; c) questions, such as “Would you like another beer?” to a guest who apparently who apparently had enough to drink and was becoming obnoxious; and d) offerings, such as “Here,

warm up with a few practice balls,” to a bowling opponent who had just thrown three strikes in a row.

Bearing in mind all of the above-stated facts, in our view, it is of a paramount importance to clearly distinguish between these three aspects (markers, conditions and types) of verbal irony. In that vein, we propose that the discrepancy between the expression and the circumstances (saying something which is obviously false) and the echoic mention of expectations, norms and viewpoints should be treated solely as conditions for irony as it is, in fact, purported in *The Allusional Pretence Theory* (Kumon-Nakamura et al. 1995) and *The Theory of Verbal Irony as an Echoic Mention* (Sperber & Wilson 1981, 1986), respectively. Namely, these two conditions should receive an equal treatment as the rest of the conditions for ironicalness put forward by the rest of the theories which define verbal irony.<sup>2</sup>

Furthermore, as to the tropes (e.g. hyperboles, litotes etc.), we personally reckon that they cannot be treated as separate types of irony as they are not always used ironically, i.e. irony is not their primary feature. They should be considered solely as irony markers which when used in an ironic utterance simply alert the interlocutor of the fact that he/she should uncover another layer of meaning of the expression which is different from the literal one.

Finally, the speech acts used in a pragmatically insincere way, in our opinion, should be treated as separate types of verbal irony alongside with the speech act of the assertives which are, in fact, the most commonly acknowledged and used type of ironic expressions.

#### 4. Conclusion

This paper deals with irony markers and by offering an overview of the classifications of the markers proposed by various researchers it confirms the fact that signaling irony is a very important aspect of verbal irony which assists ironists in expressing irony and their interlocutors in properly interpreting it. Additionally, the paper reveals the existence of a huge variety of linguistic and nonlinguistic means which in adequate circumstances can undertake the role of irony markers. Finally, it also sheds some light on the fact that clearer “boundaries” should be set among

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<sup>2</sup> ‘**Pretense**’ in *The Pretense Theory of Irony* (Clark and Gerrig 1984); ‘**allusional pretense**’ in *The Allusional Pretence Theory* (Kumon-Nakamura et al. 1995); ‘**relevant inappropriateness**’ in *The Relevance Inappropriateness Theory* (Attardo 2000); ‘**implicit display**’ in *The Implicit Display Theory* (Utsumi 2000); ‘**contrast**’ in *Colston’s Theory of Verbal Irony* (Colston 2000); ‘**reversal of evaluation**’ in *Irony as Reversal of Evaluation Theory* (Partington 2007) etc.

irony markers and other aspects of verbal irony such as: conditions for ironicalness and types of irony.

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## СИГНАЛИЗИРАЊЕ ИРОНИЈА

### Резиме

Имајќи ја предвид субтилноста на вербалната иронија и фактот дека нејзиното толкување е многу специфичен процес на инференција, препознавањето на вербалната иронија во голема мера зависи од таканаречените сигнали, маркери или знаци за иронија. Подетален преглед на литературата за вербална иронија открива дека постои голема разнообразност на вакви маркери, од кои некои се претпочитаат во устен а некои во пишан дискурс. Во овој труд нудиме преглед на различни маркери за вербална иронија кои се споменуваат од современите истражувачи. Исто така се поставува и прашањето во врска со воспоставување „појасни граници“ помеѓу маркерите